

43% of kids live in poverty on Campobello, report shows

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TELEGRAPH-JOURNAL

A recent report on child poverty published by Saint John's Human Development Council shows between 20 and 40 per cent of Charlotte County children live in poverty, with Campobello Island having the highest rate of child poverty in the region.

The 2021 Child Poverty Report Card shows Campobello Island has in fact

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one of the highest rates of child poverty in New Brunswick, with just under 43 per cent of children living in poverty, according to 2019 tax filings.

Heather Atcheson, a researcher with the council, said next year's report will show the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, which includes widespread unemployment and inflated costs of goods and services.

"The actual child poverty rate at present could potentially be higher than what we're reporting," she said. "That's a harsh reality."

Poverty is an "adverse childhood experience," the report states, "that can impose toxic stress, which alters a child's brain architecture, and impacts their development and overall well-being."

The report continues that early experiences of poverty can contribute to other adverse health outcomes later in life, including addiction and other chronic health conditions.

The report identifies food security as a key issue, with a total of 20,408 visits to food banks reported in New Brunswick over the past year.

The report said children represent more than a third of people served at food banks across the province.

Sarah Norman, of the St. George Area Food Bank, said about a third of its clients are children.

"That's consistent from when I started in 2009," she said at a recent town council meeting, noting that the food bank has served about 100 families in the St. George area throughout the pandemic, with a service area stretching from

Chance Harbour to Bocabec.

Rural poverty poses unique challenges, Atcheson said, especially on island communities like Campobello, which are further removed from resource hubs for families who are struggling.

Limited employment opportunities in the small community could also be a factor, she said.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Campobello Island's privately-run ferry service only operated from May until September, with mainland New Brunswick only accessibly year-round by driving through Maine.

Since Oct. 2020, the province has subsidized the ferry to keep it running throughout the winter so residents don't have to travel through the U.S., but those subsidies are scheduled to end on Jan. 1, 2022.

Justin Tinker, chair of the Campobello Year-Round Ferry Committee, said year-round ferry access "wouldn't solve all the island's problems," but it could remove barriers to economic development.

"There's uncertainty involved in getting goods, services, tradespeople onto the island," he said. "There's very few people willing to go out on a limb and start businesses on Campobello."

The report card shows, across the province, about one in five children live in poverty.

Campobello Island has one of the highest rates of child poverty throughout the province outside of First Nations communities, and other Charlotte County communities are also higher than the provincial rate.

The report pegs Blacks Harbour's child poverty rate at 33.3 per cent, and

St. Stephen at just over 35 per cent.

St. George and Grand Manan's child poverty rate is closer to the provincial average, with about 20 per cent of children living in poverty in those communities. In Saint Andrews, that number is closer to 25 per cent.

Atcheson identified affordable housing as one key financial stressor for families, noting that it's an issue "throughout the province and across Canada," but particularly in smaller communities where there are fewer housing options.

St. Stephen and Saint Andrews town councils have taken steps to alleviate chronically low vacancy rates in their towns by courting developers to build new high-density housing as well as single-family homes.

In Blacks Harbour, local non-profit Eastern Charlotte Waterways is also developing a 24-unit apartment building as a part of its three-pronged Project: Village community revitalization project, which also addresses transportation needs and food security in the area.

Campobello Island's village council recently purchased two parcels of land being auctioned off by the province, the island's mayor Harvey Matthews said, with the hopes of developing affordable housing for seniors.

The child poverty report showed Campobello Island's child poverty rate increased by about 10 per cent from 2020 to 2021. In most Charlotte County communities, the rate of child poverty held steady year over year. Atcheson said the cause of it is unclear.

"It will be interesting to see the impact on communities next year, looking at 2020 data," she said.